

Three Alternatives to DJSHS Overcrowding

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A 16-member school space utilization committee has come up with 3 possible plans to address increasingly severe overcrowding at DJSHS. Contrary to some previously published reports, the committee has not recommended any one of the plans to the school committee simply because it could not agree on a single recommendation.

Business manager Mickey McGonagle presented the 3 alternatives that received the most "yes" votes from the parents, educators, and town officials who served on the space committee to the school committee last Tuesday evening. The alternatives are:

1. Move 7th and 8th grades to DES and 3rd, 4th and 5th grades to a rebuilt Lower Alden School.

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2. Move 7th and 8th grades to a rebuilt Lower Alden School.

3. Move 7th grade to DES and 3rd and 4th grades to a renovated or rebuilt Lower Alden School.

Alternative #1, the most expensive option after state reimbursement, is projected to cost taxpayers \$3.9 million. The advantages are that dividing upper elementary and middle grades into 2 schools would provide additional capacity as well as allow a more even distribution of grades between schools. Separate upper elementary and middle grade schools would also provide a more responsive environment for different developmental levels of elementary and early adolescent students.

The disadvantages are that this is the most expensive alternative. It also creates the most disruption among grades and provides excess space for which there is no anticipated need in the short or long term.

Additionally, both schools would have student populations of 650-700 (recent research indicates optimum elementary school size is about 500 students and 600-900 at the high school level).

"Grade configuration alone has little impact on the success of a school and its students," McGonagle said. He added that educational philosophy, leadership, curriculum, and good communication with families is more critical to a school's success.

Alternative #2, projected to cost \$3.4 million, would relieve space problems at DJSHS with the least amount of disruption and put 7th and 8th graders together in one building, resulting in a junior high with an optimum enrollment level of about 500 students.

The disadvantages are that rebuilding Lower Alden School for a junior high would be more expensive than rebuilding it for use as an elementary school (a junior high requires special areas, i.e. science labs, home ec and industrial arts space). While this option reduces the size of the high school to an optimum level of 600-900 students, DES would be larger (860-910 students) than the optimum (500).

The 3rd option is projected to be the least expensive, \$2.5 million after state reimbursement. It also provides enough space for the short and long term under all anticipated enrollment scenarios. Additionally, Chandler and Lower Alden Schools would come close to optimum enrollment levels.

The disadvantages are that a high school with an 8th grade would have slightly higher than optimum enrollment. It might also present socialization issues for 8th graders in high school and 5th graders attending school with 6th and 7th graders. Also, DES would have a projected enrollment of 680-715 students vs. 500 optimum.

Mr. McGonagle said he is fairly confident that the bulk of the renovation work could be completed by the start of the next school year.

Supt. of Schools Eileen Williams commented, "I think the building configuration is important. But if you look at the research, it's the kind of program you design and implement that is more important than the

building."

The Committee will meet again tonight at 7:30 in the DJSHS Student Lounge to discuss the alternative plans further. They will vote on which one to accept on June 19.